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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the writing process consists of perception, recognition of the limits and resources of language, and development of the ability to capitalize on the resources of language to express our perceptions at any given moment. Perception includes two essential aspects of good writing, specific detail and interpretation of the significance of details. An individual's physiological and psychological make-up at the moment of perception, as well as the individual's culture and language, limits and shapes the process of perception. A selected list of language-focused freshman composition texts is given as an aid to help students develop and express their perceptions. These include "The Language Lens," "Language Awareness," "It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way," "Analogies: A Visual Approach to Writing," "Persona: A Style Study for Teachers and Writers," "Seeing and Writing: Fifteen Exercises in Composing Experience," "Telling Writing," "Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination," "A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition," "Perception and Persuasion: A New Approach to Effective Writing," and "Elements of Writing." (TS)

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The Reflective "I": Language Awareness and Freshman Composition*

Karl E Oelke

In September 1972 I became chairman of an English department staffing 135 sections, nearly 70 of which were freshman composition. I had never taught freshman composition, I had taken only one formal writing course, in 1954-55, and had studied rhetoric and linguistics in only the most general way. I became an English teacher because I enjoyed literature, not because I wanted to teach writing; and the students I worked with in my "advanced exposition" courses for seniors in the 60's in no way prepared me for my experience in freshman composition.

Needless to say, I've done some homework in the past few semesters, both in discussions with my colleagues and in research in the field. Some of my colleagues in the department advocate anthology readers, others the writing workshop; some the Harbrace College Handbook, others Macrorie's telling writing. Discussing and arguing about the effectiveness and controversial nature of various approaches has broadened and enriched my perspective. Reading and research have shown me that our department is, in fact, a microcosm of

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the profession. From Kitzhaber to Wilcox and the recent ADE survey I see discord and dichotomy, focusing ultimately on the question, "Should freshman composition be primarily a 'service course' or 'something more'?"[1] The answer to that question largely determines both the content and the method of the course. Yet I am beginning to see some coherence emerging. More and more freshman composition texts focus on language itself and suggest methods that encourage and develop the student's confidence in his own language resources. I suggest that language awareness can reconcile the dichotomy of goals by providing both the humanizing content of "something more" and the effective writing of "service course."

Although it listed many other goals too, the ADE survey last year showed that 75% to 100% of the departments surveyed embraced as their primary goal: "to teach the student to become a more articulate writer able to express thoughts, experiences and ideas clearly." That statement, like "love," is broad enough to encompass almost everyone's opinion; but like "love," it means quite different things to different people. It could mean prepare students to write papers for a history course, help them find their own voices in writing, and expose them to the humanizing influence of great literature. If that's too much and we emphasize only the first of these goals, we risk the extreme of "Too little--an empty service course." Emphasizing the second goal leads to the extreme of solipsism. The third, of course, leads to the

extreme of great class discussions and no writing. And, of course, some will say that the extremes are just that; any good teacher could accomplish all of the goals moderately well. But most attempts to do so have led to the frustrating Angst Robert Gorrell noted:

> Recognition of [the] inclusiveness [of rhetoric] is obviously behind much of the chaos that characterizes Freshman English courses today--whether we consider it confusion born in despair or variety born in the diverse talents of many instructors. The almost limitless scope of rhetoric can be made to justify either the attitude that composition cannot be taught and we should therefore not waste time trying to do it or the attitude that anything we want to teach is relevant.[2]

When confronted with that situation I'm ambivalently torn myself. I recognize the need for an emphasis on writing, with precious little time to "teach" the necessities--critical thinking, formal order, sparkling diction, point of view, attention to audience, etc. But I also believe that Ahab needs his humanities too. Writing itself is merely a symptom, a manifestation of keen perception, deep feeling, and thoughtfully inclusive imagination. Hence, to give up the richness of provocative literary content would be to deny an essential part of the course. But I agonize over the number of classes spent, with such content, merely discussing the provoked ideas and feelings, or worse, just helping the student to read the essay, poem, or story, to the exclusion of any attention to the process of transforming ideas and feelings into writing.

The pattern I see emerging in freshman composition resolves that dilemma for me. One aspect of the pattern

was identified by Robert Gorrell, who noted a "slow but persistent shift" in the course "toward efforts to show students how language works rather than to tell them what not to do . . ."[3] Gorrell was discussing the uses of recent findings in linguistics--language itself as partial content of the course, an emphasis on word order and sentence patterns rather than parts of speech and artificial paradigms. Granted that the remark was made in one short paragraph of a 23-page article, and that Gorrell subsequently spent three pages discussing the complexities of establishing guidelines for the content of the course. Nevertheless, proceeding in all due humility, I believe that Gorrell's comment is a harbinger of the emergence of language itself as the content of the course. Called by various names, "language awareness," "investigations in language," "reflections on language," "language and reality," an ever-increasing number of freshman composition texts focus on language itself.

The other aspect of the pattern is a spin-off from Gorrell's choice of the word "show" rather than "tell" to describe approaches: getting the students enthusiastically involved in writing freely, honestly, and personally. Ken Macrorie, James E. Miller, Jr., and others have shown that students command a fairly rich rhetoric when they enter college. Our problem is to overcome the constipation of the pen they suffer. Once they have started to write, with the feeling that someone respects what they have to say, they learn quickly if they are not put down. Whether one

calls it self-awareness, looking within, tapping the unconscious, or home-cosmography, the authors of most of these new texts use imaginative, effective methods to get our students writing.

The difficulty here lies in moving outward from the self to what Sheridan Baker calls the "validities beyond the self."[4] To wallow continuously in one's own stream of consciousness denies the power of language to help us clarify our changing relationships to the world about us. The descent into the underworld is only a prelude, albeit a necessary one, to the voyage out. There seems to be, however, a mighty tension between what Hans P. Guth terms the conservative rhetoric of rational order and the liberal rhetoric of discovery and inquiry.[5] Making the shift from tentative, exploratory, inductive writing to an ordered precise presentation is not only difficult, it is often inappropriate.

Here again, though, I see a resolution to this problem in language itself as content of the course because it provides both a means of genuine exploration of self and a means of shifting to rhetorical strategies appropriate for specific situations. Let me, at this point, outline what I believe to be the essential elements of the writing process and then mention briefly how the new language texts treat that process. The writing process consists, to oversimplify a bit, of perception, recognition of the limits and resources of language, and development of the ability to capitalize on the resources of language to express our perceptions at any given moment.

Perception includes two essential aspects of good writing--specific detail and interpretation of the significance

of details. The "inert facts" that Henry Adams so sardonically castigates in The Education . . . are absolutely necessary, but they must, as he noted, be arranged in some pattern else they are meaningless. Nothing startlingly new there; good writing has always embodied vivid, concrete detail to support and clarify generalizations. Novelty enters when one applies the current theories of perception that Walker Gibson, among others, has been bringing to our attention for some years now.

In a well known series of experiments conducted in the late 1940's and early 1950's, Adelbert Ames, Jr., produced evidence to support a new theory of perception. The subjects were exposed to different visual situations--points of light in a dark room, partially inflated balloons illuminated from a concealed source, rooms shaped in proportions designed to disguise their "real" size and shape, and a moving trapezoidal window with a straight tube through it. In each situation the subject perceived reality to be something other than it was; but in each situation the subject's perception was closely analogous to his own past experience, "some sort of weighted average of the past consequences of acting with respect to that pattern." When the subject had to act on his perceptions, he would act on his assumption of the "reality" of the situation, and that assumption was usually wrong. "After he had tested this assumption by purposive action, he shifted to [another] assumption, less

probable in terms of past experience but still possible. . . . As his assumption changed, [his] perception did also." The new theory stated that "perception is a functional affair based on action, experience, and probability. The thing perceived is an inseparable part of the function of perceiving, which in turn includes all aspects of the total process of living."[6]

William James used the term "collateral contemporaneity" to describe the human tendency to simplify our experience by categorizing and excluding "irrelevant" sensations.[7] Recent observations of the process of visual perception corroborate James's insight by highlighting the physiological limitations of perception:

> The coding task in vision is enormous. There are nearly 130 million photo-receptors in the retina, each theoretically capable of being active at the same time, and refiring at rates approaching 1000 times per second under optimal circumstances. The 130 million cells converge, diverge, and interconnect among the neural cells into which they feed. Ultimately, less than one million fibers in the optic nerve are available to represent the activities of all of the photo-receptors and all of their supporting neural structures.[8]

Thus, even our highly complex, computer-like brain is limited by a physical structure that reduces 130 billion bits of information to one million bits of information. Coding indeed! Whether one adopts the "cell assembly" or the holistic Gestalt theory of perception, and evidence supports both,[9] it is certain that perception itself is an active, not a passive, experience. The individual's physiological and psychological make-up at the moment of perception highly limits and shapes his perception and understanding of the constant flux of "reality."

These observations suggest that the significance of "deep structure" in the writing process transcends mere rules for the generation of surface structure. For teachers they suggest working not only with words on paper but with the human being, possessed of mind, soul, and feelings, who generates the words. Further, if we can work with the student in the process of generation, rather than after the words are hardened into "final" form, we stand a better chance of engendering awareness. For the student, these observations suggest the wisdom of working with one's own perception and metaphor, not someone else's; for if we are, in fact, unique individuals, freshness, insight, and originality will result from an honest description of individual perception.

Our perceptions are limited not only by our psychological and physiological make-up, but also by our culture and its language. Attempts by different people to describe a single shared event dramatically illustrate the Procrustean mold of language as well as perceptual biases. In 1936 Benjamin Lee Whorf noted that "language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order, a certain segment of the world that is easily expressible by the type of symbolic means that language employs." In a later paper, Whorf gave an example of the way we use and are used by the metaphorical nature of language:

> . . . we can hardly refer to the simplest nonspatial situation without constant resort to physical metaphors. I grasp the thread of another's argument, but if its level is over my head my attention may wander and lose touch with the drift of it, so that when he comes to his point we differ widely . . .[10]

In addition to metaphor, other aspects of language shape and limit us: structural meaning as opposed to lexical meaning; predication suggesting actor, action, and recipient; misuse of the verb "to be"; and the many ritualistic utterances of the culture.

Although the Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski "hypothesis" has not been elaborated in a comprehensive system, it provides a pedagogically vivid means of examining the relationships among perception, thought and feeling, and language. That we are limited by language patterns as well as by the process of perception is a revelation to many students. Helping them become aware of the impact of those limitations on our concepts of, for example, kinship, space and time, cause and effect, is a necessary part of teaching writing.

At this point, I believe I could wring assent, if somewhat qualified or reserved, to the proposition that language awareness, to include the perception process and cultural influence, can provide provocative content for the freshman composition course. The humanizing, liberal arts concern for reflective, critical thought about one's relationship to himself, other people, and his society could be as easily embodied in the course as the concern for the essential creativity of writing business letters or papers for a history course. I think I could also wring assent, probably still

qualified, to the proposition that the inductive, perception-centered approach to writing, beginning with personal awareness, is probably the most effective way to get students writing. The harder problem, at least for me, is how to shift from interesting discussions about the nature and effects of language and writing focused on self, to the students' awareness of "validities beyond the self."

In my own, still evolving, approach I use one basic text for the course, Sparke and McKowen's Montage, because of its myriad response-oriented, discussion provoking writing activities and because it fits my style. I also use techniques and approaches suggested by Macrorie, Murray, Miller, and Gibson (all in the annotated text list at the end of the paper). I have found that the daily journal, ungraded, unmarked, but focused on class discussions and read periodically with only brief positive notations, provides the basis for honest writing. It also leads to a natural shift, about one-third or half way through the course, from concentration on self to awareness of the variety of selves we are, the variety of attitudes we can adopt toward our subject, and the variety of audiences we address. The graded papers, which can be revised often, grow out of the journals. It's still awkward to make the shift; but the quality of writing seems much higher than it was when I used the thematic anthology.

The more language-focused texts I examine, however, the more encouraged I am that this is where it's at. They all

address, in various ways, the fundamentals of language awareness: the perception process, limitations and resources of language, and ways to manipulate the language for different situations. In addition, and perhaps most important for one who struggles with the tension between department guidelines and the autonomy of the individual teacher, they use many different approaches and can accomodate a broad range of student capability. There are anthologies, response-oriented grab bags, progressively structured expositions, and guides for textless writing workshops. Some would be suitable for the non-traditional or disadvantaged student; others require a much higher degree of reading skill and abstraction capability. If members of a department agree on the centrality of language to the course, and can establish objectives that are generally precise without denying flexibility, there are language-focused texts for almost any approach.

The appended list is not totally comprehensive but it is fairly representative. It encompasses approaches to language that complement a large variety of teaching styles; there are others, and more are being published. As we approach an accurate grammar of our language, and as we help our students develop appropriate rhetorics to cope with various situations, I believe that language awareness will provide the most appropriate content for our course, both as "service course" and as "something more." As content, it fosters self awareness, perception, and sensitivity to the techniques and effects of language manipulation; it is

suitable to a variety of styles and students; it provides a means of joining thought-provoking content with an effective method of overcoming constipation of the pen; but most important, it places emphasis where it belongs in a composition course--on a respectful attitude toward the mysteriously wonderful processes of creation with language.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Albert R. Kitzhaber, Themes, Theories, and Therapy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963). Thomas W. Wilcox, The Anatomy of College English (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973). Page Tigar, "ADE Survey of Freshman English," ADE Bulletin, 43 (November 1974), 13-23. The terms are used by Wilcox, p. 79, and are, as he says, roughly equivalent to Kitzhaber's distinction between the "practical" and "liberal" view of the course.

[2] "Rhetoric, Dickoric, Doc: Rhetoric as an Academic Discipline," CCC, 26 (February 1975), 15.

[3] "Freshman Composition," in John C. Gerber, ed., The College Teaching of English (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), p. 102.

[4] "Writing as Discovery," ADE Bulletin, 43 (November 1974), 36.

[5] "Three Faces of Rhetoric," CCC, February 1972; also in chapter on rhetoric in his English for a New Generation (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

[6] W. H. Ittelson and F. P. Kilpatrick, "Experiments in Perception," Scientific American, August 1951.

[7] "Reflex Action and Theism," collected in The Will to Believe, 1897, and cited by Walker Gibson, The Limits of Language (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), and James E. Miller,

Jr., Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972).

[8] Ralph Haber and Maurice Hershenson, The Psychology of Visual Perception (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), p. 35.

[9] Roy M. Pritchard, "Stabilized Images on the Retina," Scientific American, June 1961.

[10] "The Punctual and Segmentative Aspects of Verbs in Hopi," Language, 12 (1936), 127-131: repr. in John B. Carroll, ed., Language, Thought, and Reality (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1956), p. 65. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," in Carroll, p. 146.

Selected List of Language-Focused
Freshman Composition Texts

Bonah, R. Brent, and Sheila Shively. the language lens. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974. Anthology. "Language is a lens through which we perceive, record, and store impressions of an ever-changing world." Five-part structure (perception, language, directives, symbol, abstraction and classification) consisting of poems, short stories and essays, and photographs. Writing exercises and general comments on the writing process following each of the five parts.

Eschholz, Paul A., Alfred F. Rosa, and Virginia P. Clark, eds. Language Awareness. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974. Anthology. Purposes: foster awareness of extent to which language is abused and misused, of resources available in language, and of responsible use of language. Five parts: perspectives, language and occupation, prisoners of language, influencing language, prospects. Discussion and review questions follow each selection; writing suggestions and "notable quotations" follow each part.

Friedrich, Dick and David Kuester. It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way. New York: Random House, 1972. I've not seen this one, but base my observations on a book review by Bertie E. Fearing in Teaching English in the Two-Year College, Winter 1975. Underlying philosophy is that each person must find his own style and must move from the habits of the spoken

word to the different habits of the written word. Three components: instructional material, writing activities, sample student writings, the last interspersed throughout. Nineteen chapters roughly divided into four parts: sensitivity to language, to detail, to audience, and to sharing. Inductive approach throughout.

Garcia, Anthony and Robert Myers. Analogies: A Visual Approach to Writing. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974. Coherent series of lessons and group exercises designed to develop self awareness, connection between individual perspective and language, and awareness of role of creativity (especially in writing) in life. Consistent use of visual arts. Focuses on sentence and paragraph development. Inductive approach throughout.

Gibson, Walker. Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers. New York: Random House, 1969. The book "centers its attention on the author's created persona, his mask or voice, in passages of prose. . . . the message or utterance is seen as modified by the created personality put forth in the act of communicating." Two parts of three chapters each: reading--the voices we catch (rhetorical devices to change voice in first-person-singular prose, voices in newswriting, varieties of voice in a single novel, Herzog); writing--the voices we pitch (tone, speaker's view of audience; attitude, speaker's view of subject; language and role-playing). Samples and exercises throughout.

Gibson, Walker. Seeing and Writing: Fifteen Exercises in Composing Experience. 2nd ed. New York: David McKay, 1974. Coherent series of exercises designed "to place the student in positions where he must see his experience from shifting points of view, and must change his terms and his tone of voice as he does so." Three-part organization: ordinary personal experience, the educational experience, the writer as student-historian and student-scientist. Provocative readings and connected exercises throughout.

Macrorie, Ken. telling writing. New York: Hayden Book Co., 1970. Increasingly popular and effective inductive approach to writing (compare with the Friedrich and Kuester book above), the book begins with free writing and works through (without technical terms) essential principles of rhetoric. Twenty three chapters, including ones entitled "Tightening," "Telling Facts," "Fabulous Realities," "Through Facts to Realities," "Through Facts to Large Meanings," "Sound and Voice," "Creating Form," "Sharpening," and "Observing Conventions."

Miller, James E., Jr. Word, Self, Reality: The Rhetoric of Imagination. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972. Assuming that highly-motivated writing will tap language resources deep within the individual and that language can and must serve the individual in the discovery of self and external world, this book focuses on ways to help the individual connect the mysterious processes of [redacted] imagination and

language generation. Two parts: (1) Words in the World (language as creation; writing, thinking, and feeling; writing and meaning); (2) The World in Words (writing as discovery--inner worlds; writing as exploration--outer worlds; the individual voice--styles private and public). Exercises and "points of departure" following each of the 24 chapters.

Murray, Donald M. A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968. The basis of a textless, writing workshop course, Murray's book "shows the teacher how to help the student develop" writing abilities in several explicit and imaginative ways. Six parts: the writer's seven skills, the writing teacher's seven skills, the experience of writing, a climate for writing, techniques of teaching writing, resources for the writing teacher.

Paul, Raymond and Pellegrino W. Golone. Perception and Persuasion: A New Approach to Effective Writing. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1973. Designed initially for disadvantaged students, the course from which this book developed showed that the methods were increasingly effective as students' abilities increased. Begins with free writing and works through relationships of perception, thought, and language generation. Five parts: thought, imagination, and writing; dynamics of language; reading, comprehension, and logic; projects in investigation; appendices (punctuation, grammar, research paper, library, dictionary and thesaurus).

Exercises throughout.

Potter, Robert R. Making Sense: Exploring Semantics and Critical Thinking. New York: Globe Book Co., 1974. The book "covers such areas as the threats imposed by the increasing stridency of our verbal environment, perception and projection, non-verbal communication, the protean nature of 'reality,' and the effect of language on thought and behavior." Inductive approach, with about half of the book devoted to "activities that utilize discovery procedures." Eight parts: introduction to general semantics; perception and projection; the "allness attitude"; non-verbal communication; the "two-valued orientation"; levels and structures of understanding; propaganda and personality; critical thinking. Exercises throughout.

Scholes, Robert and Carl H. Klaus. Elements of Writing. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972. Assuming that writing is central to the course and that the book for the course "should get in the way of that work as little as possible," this book presents first "the essential minimum of theory" and then "some demanding but possibly amusing exercises." The first part, Elements of Writing, addresses relationships among writing, speaking, and thinking and the shapes of written sequences. The second part, Contexts of Writing, addresses the relationships of writer to subject and audience; and the third, Practice in Writing, analysis and synthesis of sentences. Many exercises throughout.

Sparke, William and Clark McKowen. Montage: Investigations in Language. New York: Macmillan, 1970. Inductive, games-playing, "response-oriented" approach to "the investigation of language in its cultural context," the book forces students to interpret a disparate array of experiences. Although without formal apparatus or division, it is divided roughly into six parts, with "bridges" between some: aspects of language; perception and language; journalism; film and language; "words on paper"; and sensitivity to style. Extensive use of journals and group exercises.

Wagner, Geoffrey and Sanford R. Radner. Language and Reality: A Semantics Approach to Writing. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1974. Based on the assumptions of a need for interdisciplinary approach to language and a need for genuine awareness as opposed to "ingestion of a body of factual content," this book focuses on "what language does, rather than what language is." Two parts: (1) Signs (the human animal, extensions of man, the reality of words); (2) Symbols (denotation, connotations, and metaphor; language and reality; language structure and thought; abstraction; reasoning systems; contexts; taboo). Discussion questions and writing exercises after each of the 36 small units; more extensive review exercises after each of the 10 numbered chapters.